



## Chair's report 2020 -2021

### Letter from the Chair

Look back at 2020-21, there is no denying that it's been a challenging time – for individuals, organisations and the society at large. And yet, despite several uncertainties, Aching Arms has continued to thrive. This is a testament to the resilience of our staff, volunteers and their unwavering belief in the mission of our Charity.

Despite the various complexities in the world we live and work in - including closure of schools, changes to how the NHS frontline care for bereaved parents and the general disruption to life under the Government Lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, our focus at Aching Arms has singularly been to provide support to bereaved parents and supply comfort bears to thousands of families.

We have made progress across many fronts this year. This report aims to outline these areas in more detail. I'd like to start by sharing some of the key highlights - our new website was launched in April 2020, more new hospitals chose to include our comfort bears in their bereavement pathway, community fundraising reached into new events and new regions, workplace bereavement training began, business networking has extended, and grant application bids were successful. The decision in early 2020 to extend our Client Care Service has undoubtedly enhanced the quality of care we offer to all who contact us, and most importantly, many recently and longer ago bereaved parents and their families, have found comfort from the gift of an Aching Arms Bear and support from our Care Service.

All of this work has been thanks to the hard work of our staff and volunteers under the steadfast leadership of our CEO Leanne Turner and guidance of the Board of Trustees.

Below are the details on progress against Aching Arms strategic focus areas aligned to our Interim Business Plan. It gives me great pride to share that our progress against all pillars of the Business Plan has been positive.

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#### **1. Promoting and protecting the health of parents whose baby has died.**

We now work with 169 hospitals across all nations of the United Kingdom. **3637** bears were donated to health care settings and **1414** were given directly to bereaved families upon request in the last 12-month period.

Bears:

These strong numbers have come in despite some significant challenges brought in by the restrictions arising out of Covid 19. In response to the pandemic, many hospitals had their maternity wards/units relocated or bereavement suites closed and their use reassigned for other purposes. Also, many hospitals restricted the number of donations and visitors on site, which in some cases prohibited the delivery of bears. This meant Aching Arms bears were sometimes less easily available for health professionals to offer to families as they were situated elsewhere in the hospital.

The pandemic also impacted the delivery of our postal bears. We made the decision to suspend the service during the height of the pandemic in response to the Government stay at home order. As the restrictions eased, we resumed this service and have seen an uptake in request for our comfort bears.

We're humbled by the incredible feedback we about our bears. Our bears continue to be cherished by the families who receive them – an example below.

*“Just a little email to say thank you so so much for our 4 aching arms bears you have sent us. They are just so perfect and beautiful. My husband and I love them. We have them sitting on our babies shelf in the lounge and they are just lovely. We can't thank you enough for them, they brought tears to our eyes when they arrived. We will treasure them always and the little ones and their families who have kindly gifted them to us.”*

Hospitals:

Links with leading hospitals in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales are continuing to grow despite the cancellation of a number of national conferences. We saw more Early Pregnancy Units and Gynecology units engage with us to understand how Aching Arms bears can help women who experience an early loss.

There is evidence that the second Covid19 Government Lockdown during December to March continued to have a negative impact on recently bereaved women and their partners. During the Covid19 lockdown the NHS frontline were and still are, under incredible pressure. Aching Arms has supported the NHS by helping to reduce the feeling of isolation following a baby bereavement and stepped-up services to reassure midwives and nurses that we are able to help the parents they are not able to right now. This is especially important as face-to-face support groups/family visits/bereavement clinical visits were not possible. With this in mind, we were successful in securing National Lottery funding to continue the Supporting Arms Service.

We've continued our efforts to contribute effectively within the baby loss sector. Our CEO and founder Leanne Turner was involved in the working party to revise the Pregnancy and Babies Charity Network Manifesto. The working party remit was initially to focus on addressing inequality and diversity within the maternity journey, but as work progressed, the entire manifesto has been revised. We continue to be active members of the Baby Loss Awareness Week Alliance.

Aching Arms has come together with the Wilderness Foundation to provide a nature-based baby loss community meet up. This will be the first event for Aching Arms and will be the basis for running events similar to this nationwide. The event will be led by one of the Wilderness Foundation's experienced facilitators, who specialise in grief, trauma, mental wellbeing and using nature to provide a safe space for people experiencing this. The Aching Arms session will be offered to Mothers and their partners, siblings, the extended family and anyone else effected by the loss of a baby. It will consist of a nature ramble, a camp fire, planting a tree for each family, creating a memory flag and a time to think about hopes for the future. This is an entirely new initiative for Aching Arms and and will provides another support option for the families we work with.

## 2. Advance education about the experience of baby loss

Aim 2 of the Interim Business Plan focuses on our Awareness Training programme. This year we collaborated with a film director to rollout a 30-minute health professional training film, a 5 minute 'reminder film' for health professionals and a 7 minute marketing film aimed at employers. This Health Professional film is now being used successfully. The 30-minute training film has been sent to 68 hospital teams and a lot of these teams are using it as part of their regular bereavement training programme. We have begun remote hospital training sessions and are in the process of organising a South West region training event and an NHS England training event.

### Support Network:

We've continued to develop the support services that we can offer to families. This has led to Aching Arms entering into some completely new areas as outlined below:

Supporting Arms, Our Telephone support service: We launched our telephone support service officially on the 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020. From April 2020 until August 2021, we have carried out 83 support calls, approximately of one hour long with a few of them being repeat callers. The content of these calls has varied from just wanting a listening ear to wanting suggestions on celebrating anniversaries or funerals.

We have received a lot of positive feedback following our calls:

*"It's just really really hard and I felt you could relate to that. Talking to someone who gets it makes it so much easier, I didn't have to explain myself they just got it"*

Support emails: We have now officially introduced a support email service. We receive more emails than calls, some of which translate into calls and sometimes email is enough. *"Thank you for your emails. Thank you for caring about my story"*, again families are feeling our genuine care and compassion which reflects positivity not only on the Client Care team but also on Aching Arms as a charity.

Supporting Fathers: We've started some initial steps in providing support to fathers. A 'Men's Working Party' was held with a group of men who support Aching Arms. A whatsapp meeting was held facilitated by the Client Care Manager and a male counsellor. This was a very successful meeting and provided a comfortable place for the participants to openly chat. Based on suggestions received, we are evaluating areas of support including offering a regular 'men's chat group' to provide an opportunity for Dad's to speak away from their partners and to be able to speak openly without feeling that they are worrying their partner.

## 3. Support and disseminate research into methods of alleviating suffering arising from baby loss

Positive steps have been taken regarding our research into the effectiveness of a comforter after pregnancy and baby loss.

Our trustee Dr. Anna Clancy continues to supervise a research project being carried out by a trainee clinical psychologist at Lancaster University. This project's focus is on the experiences of fathers whose baby died during pregnancy or at birth and whether the offer of transitional objects, such as Aching Arms bears, helped them. It is anticipated that the project will be completed in 2022 and the trainee is aiming to get it published in a peer reviewed journal.

## **4. Fundraising**

### **Community Fundraising**

Over the last 12 months, we've established systems and protocols to make fundraising for Aching Arms simple and fun. We've responded swiftly to the changes to the fundraising landscape in 2020/21, establish new ways of giving whilst ensuring donor relations are sensitive and supportive. We're now using social media to create successful new ways for fundraisers to support Aching Arms.

With mass-participation sporting events cancelled and traditional face-to-face community fundraising events not permitted, the fundraising landscape has changed along with the world around us. Our passion, commitment, dedication, resilience, determination, and creativity has seen our income remain stable despite operating in exceptional circumstances. Some examples are below:

- To try and preserve the events we know are special to our supporters, for 2021 we made our annual Forget Me Not Tea Party campaign an all-year-round event rather than limit it to spring.
- When the opportunity presented itself and the Virtual London Marathon was confirmed for a second year running, we secured 10 charity places.
- The 2020 Christmas Virtual Balloon Race was well received by our supporters, and we chose to run it again for Easter 2020
- We tested running posts with the Facebook/Instagram donate button for the first time for National Teddy Bear Day

We understand that some donors want the 'feel-good' feeling of donating to a charity and supporting a cause that resonates with them without necessarily running, getting muddy or baking a cake. They need to feel a connection to us and our cause. Our donors want to do something in their own/their family/friend's baby's name to help keep their memory alive and our 'In Memory' campaigns are always well supported. Knowing this, helps to inform future fundraising events and campaigns where it is 'easy' for a supporter to donate without having to participate. With this in mind, we are working on areas future campaigns to lean towards the digital fundraising trend.

### **Corporate Fundraising**

We have made strong, positive steps with building relationships with corporate partners this year. We have resumed our collaboration with Theatre Re on their previously disrupted tour of BIRTH. Aching Arms volunteers will attend a number of their performances beginning in September 2021.

St James Place Wealth Management Foundation awarded Aching Arms £2500 to extend the 'Supporting Arms' Service by hosting face to face community events.

We secured a further £3000 grant from the Brentwood Covid19 Recovery Grant programme.

We are awaiting the outcome of a £10,000 Grant application to The Openworks Foundation. We were nominated by an employee you received support from Aching Arms. The application has progressed to the next stage and the outcome will be announced on the 24<sup>th</sup> September.

Networking with small business owners is also proving positive, with many joining campaigns throughout the year. It is hoped we can extend our business networking reach thanks to newly training Volunteer Ambassadors.

## **5. Human Resources**

### **Staff**

There are many successes that each member of the team has achieved this year. We are deeply proud of our team and in gratitude of their commitment, passion and hard work.

The staff employed and contracted by Aching Arms have worked incredibly hard again this year. It has been a difficult time when the pandemic caused disruption to family and working life. The mental health of our staff has been a high priority and formal supervision from our Wellbeing practitioner has been a crucial factor in helping to keep us all on balance despite the ups and downs.

As a growing charity, we've continued to contract HR services, Social Media Management, Fundraising Administration, book keeping and the client Support helpline role. The Board is reviewing all these roles to assess if permanent appointments are now necessary. We are undertaking a strategic review of the organization structure that aligns with our continued growth, strategic priorities and the Charity's mission.

### **Health Professionals**

As a result of our survey conducted with Health Professionals, 42/49 were very satisfied with the overall service and communication and most consider the bears to be well received and bring comfort. A sample of comments received as a part of the survey are below:

*'Aching arms bears are so positively received by all parents and are very much of a comfort to them, easing the care we give them.'*

*'They help us as health professionals to let the family know they are not alone. Offering the gift of a bear from a parent support organisation helps to open the door for a conversation about available support out there for parents after they leave the hospital. The links to the website are so valuable as there is support from Aching Arms plus links and contact information for other support services.'*

### **Volunteers**

We continue to be supported by a dedicated and loyal team of postal volunteers who strive to get bears to families as quickly as possible and in as good as condition as possible. This process has been streamlined by the use of the 'bear request form' on the new website which was launched this year. Parents can now access this form directly from the website's home page, which is an improvement from the previous website, and the new site also allows people wanting to purchase a bear for someone else to also do this directly via the E-Shop, which has again sped up the process for the purchaser.

The feedback from our 150+ volunteers via the annual survey is a positive picture again this year. A sample of comments received as a part of the are below:

*“I think AA is a superb charity doing such good work for so many families. I feel so honoured to play a very small role in the success of the charity. I hope to volunteer for many more years to come.”*

*“I enjoy volunteering for such a worthwhile charity and would be happy to contribute more hours.”*

*“Really proud at the new supporting arms service and really pleased to be a part of it all.”*

More formal Volunteer Training is currently being created. We created a 2 hour online Volunteer Ambassador training to be launched in September 2021. We have plans to create training modules for hospital volunteers in the next 6 months.

## **Governance**

The Board of Trustees continue to stay deeply committed to taking the Charity to the next level of growth and governance. Our goal is to ensure we guide our team on pursuing our mission and making decisions with both speed and precision. We’ve aimed to ensure that the staff and team feel trusted and supported. We are having discussions on the evolution of the Board of Trustees in line with the skills needed for growth as well as taking into account diversity and representation.

## **In closing**

In closing, I’d like to express my gratitude to all of our community – our team, our volunteers, health professionals, supporting organisations and institutions. It is the dedication, grit and grace of our community that has kept us going in a clearly challenging time over the last year. We’ve not only continued to operate effectively, we have in fact grown our impact during this time.

With the backbone of such deeply-committed people with us, we’re well-positioned to grow and serve in the years ahead.

## **Towards 2022**

Mahatma Gandhi said ‘The future depends on what we do in the present’.

As I reflect on what Aching Arms is doing in the present, I am full of pride and promise for what our future holds. We have a clear path ahead on areas to focus in the coming year. We remain determined in driving our mission forward and evolving our Charity for the next chapters of growth.

Signed: SUNDEEP KAUR     Date: 31 MAY 2022

Sundeep Kaur

Chairperson

Aching Arms

Registered Charity: 1153296

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